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Understanding the Response

Mimi Mendez de Leon

Over the past century, Christianity has become a truly global faith. It is practiced on all continents by a wide variety of ethnic and social groups. However, the Christian message is not easily universalized. As Christianity spreads, it encounters cultural barriers both on the part of those who spread the word and for those to whom it is spread. Global Christianity challenges the assumption that there is a core faith, that the Christian message can be removed from all cultural influences. This assumption coincides with the ‘evolutionary belief’, which Mark Lewis Taylor, a theologian at Princeton Theological Seminary, outlines in his book *Religion, Politics, and the Christian Right*.¹ This belief is that our social systems have completed the process of evolution; thus, Christianity and democracy are the final products of human history. For believers in this theory, the only way forward is to spread these systems across the globe. They leave no room for the evolution of Christianity as it encounters different cultures.

In Africa today, the evolutionary belief faces many problems. Christianity is growing rapidly there—in 1900 there were 10 million African Christians compared to the 360 million in 2000.² That is nearly half of the African population, forty-six percent, who declare themselves Christian.³ However, in 1900 and before, Christianity was used to oppress the continent. The portrayal of Africans as pagans and savages allowed for missionaries to disassemble cultural systems and for colonists to destroy landscapes and lives. Yet, Christianity has continued to grow. The faith of the oppressor has become the faith of the oppressed. But is it truly the same faith? If not, then what is emerging on the African continent, and what can we learn from it?

Theologians from Africa have been working for the past half-century to remove the West from Christianity. The religion brought by missionaries and colonists upheld Western values and ideals. Religion and culture are intrinsically interconnected, but for a religion to be fully accepted by a people, it must speak to them through their own culture. Thus theologians from Africa have been working to deconstruct the cultural barriers the Western faith created in order to construct a theology from Africa—the theology of inculturation. Inculturation indicates the dynamic intermixing of culture and Christianity. This dialogue between Christi-

1 Taylor, Mark Lewis. *Religion, Politics, and the Christian Right* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011).

2 Jenkins, Philip. “The Next Christendom” *The Atlantic Monthly* (October 2002).

3 Ibid.

anity and culture has been called by various terms over the years. The on-going process of understanding this dynamic has been called indigenization, adaptation, Africanization, and inculturation. In order to refer to this process as inculturation, I will explain the problems arising from the use of these other terms. Then I will discuss the problems found in the term inculturation and how contemporary theologians are responding to them.

Precursors to Inculturation

Africanization was the first term for this process. It arose in the political arena and originally implied the transition of leadership, including leadership within the church, from European colonists to Africans. It was the search for a “relevant African perspective on the Christian faith”.⁴ “Des pretres noirs s’interrogent”, a document written by African priests in 1956, began this exploration by calling for a theology that spoke to them in their cultural situations.⁵ Some theories that were used in this process were the stepping-stone theory as well as Dickson’s idea of cultural continuity with the Bible.⁶ The stepping-stone theory assumes that there are elements of African culture that could effectively communicate the Christian faith in the African context. This theory, similar to adaptation, does not challenge Western theological ideas but rather renders them in an African context. Dickson’s cultural continuity assumes that elements of African traditional religions correspond with Old Testament beliefs. And since the Old Testament is the foundation of the “cultural presuppositions” of the New Testament, then African culture and belief is continuous with the Bible.⁷ Since the Bible is based in Jewish culture, and Jewish culture is similar to African culture, the two can speak to each other by translating the Jewish terms into their African equivalents. However, as Antonio points out, the key to this theory is the difference between cultures, even as it works to establish the similarities.⁸ As African theologians work to find the similarities, they highlight the differences, which undermine their very work. Thus the methods of Africanization undermine the goal of creating a Christianity that works in Africa since one does nothing more than mask Western beliefs and the other highlights the foreignness of Christianity by unknowingly identifying its differences. Not only that, but Africanization, as a term, must be rejected as an invention of the European colonists trying to remain in power through European-ized proxies.

4 Martey, Emmanuel. *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1933), 65.

5 Abble, Albert. *Des Prêtres Noirs S’interrogent* (Paris: Éditions Du Cerf, 1957).

6 Dickson, Kwesi A. *Theology in Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1984), 141.

7 Ibid, 181.

8 Antonio, Edward P. *Inculturation and Postcolonial Discourse in African Theology* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006).

The term indigenization as described by E. B. Idowu, a Nigerian theologian who worked to outline African traditional religion, refers to a translation of the Church's language into the vernacular.⁹ This process extends beyond literal translation or liturgical changes and has to do with all Church structures and theologies. However, this term is problematic for several reasons. As Dickson outlines, it assumes a core truth of the Gospel to be translated. This core would be separate from cultural perspectives. The process of indigenization would take this core and translate it into cultural terminology. However, this assumes that the core can be removed from all culture, that there is a way to read the Gospel without a bias or perspective. For African theologians, the culture that the core must be removed from was that of the European missionaries and colonizers. It is impossible to separate the core from this bias; therefore, indigenization does not imply original thinking or analysis since the core truth would be a Western idea. It means taking Christian traditions found in the Western context and translating them into the African context, which does not remove them from the Western context at all. In addition, the term indigenization itself has several negative connotations. It is reminiscent of the oppressive language of European colonizers that degraded Africa. The very term indigenization discredits the process because it implies the inferiority of the cultural into which Idowu hopes to translate the faith.

Adaptation also is another term that holds similar problems. It means taking Christian concepts and fitting them into the African context. It holds mainly pastoral connotations meaning that in the adaptation process, the music used in worship and the structure of the clergy would be central changes. The church would be an African entity because it appeared to Africans in an African context, i.e. traditional drums would be played and traditional cloth would be worn. Central to this process was the push for African church leaders. At the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) in 1963, leaders from across Africa decided that an effort to train new priests, ministers and laity would be made.¹⁰ This decision was to progress the idea of adaptation by having Africans speak to Africans, so that the faith could be theirs. This process, however, does not rid Africa of colonial interpretations of Christianity; rather it disguises Western Christianity in an African shroud. It does not go far enough. Adaptation, like indigenization, implies the superiority of Western interpretations of Christianity. While it does make a valiant effort to connect to the people, it does not work to support those people against a religion that "imposes itself only by tearing up its coverts by their roots, out of where they live".¹¹

9 Idowu, E.B. *Towards an Indigenous Church* (London: Oxford University Press, 1956).

10 Martey, Emmanuel. *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation*, 64.

11 Boulaga, Eboussi. *Christianity without Fetishes* (Münster: Lit, 2002) 63.

The Emergence of Inculturation Theology

Thus we come to the term inculturation. Inculturation as a theological term was first popularized by Father Pedro Arrupe, a Spanish Jesuit who worked as a missionary both in Japan and Latin America. Arrupe defines inculturation as:

"The incarnation of Christian life and of the Christian message in a particular cultural context, in such a way that this experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the culture in question (this alone would be no more than a superficial adaptation) but becomes a principle that animates, directs and unifies the culture, transforming it and remaking it so as to bring about a new creation."¹²

Inculturation thus became the solution to the lack of depth others found in Africanization, indigenization and adaptation. In 1977, the Pan-African Conference of Third World Theologians met, bringing together Catholics and Protestants and Anglophones and francophones.¹³ At this conference, the term inculturation was selected and approved by all. Inculturation went beyond the liturgy and church structure and worked as a theological approach to the problem of the foreign faith. It confronts "the Christian faith and African culture".¹⁴ The biblical basis for inculturation is the incarnation as well as the Paschal Mystery.

The idea of the incarnation in inculturation is that just as Jesus became human in order to deliver his message, so too must the Christian faith become a part of culture in order to spread the Word. It is important to note that the term incarnation itself was used as a synonym of inculturation rather than as a tool. However, Pope Paul VI discouraged the use of this term because it threatened the universalized theology of the Catholic Church.¹⁵ Now, the incarnation has become a part of the broader theology of inculturation.

As Alyward Shorter, the President of the Missionary Institute in London, argues, the incarnation of Jesus was accompanied by his enculturation.¹⁶ By accepting and speaking through a certain culture, Jesus demonstrated the importance of culture. Christ needed culture to speak to the Jewish community thus, setting the precedent of speaking through culture. This understanding of incarnation does not develop the dualism that the Platonized tradition has. Jesus is one; his body and his soul are not viewed as separate entities. African philosophy does not include such dichotomies. However, this does not mean that the issue of the body/soul bi-

12 Arrupe, Pedro. "Letter to the Whole Society on Inculturation" *Aixala* Vol. 3, 172.

13 Martey, Emmanuel. *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation*, 67.

14 Ukpong, Justin. *African Theologies Now. (Eldoret: Gaba, 1984)* 30.

15 Martey, Emmanuel. *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation*, 66.

16 Shorter, Alyward. *Toward a Theology of Inculturation*, 12.

nary should be ignored. While inculturation presents the image of a whole Christ in the incarnation, culture included, it is clear throughout this process that Eurocentric ideas are still powerful. Therefore, the presentation of a whole Christ must be stated clearly in opposition to the sexualization, and therefore marginalization, of Africans and others.

As Shorter also argues, the incarnation is not enough to understand inculturation. The Paschal Mystery must also be considered, for not only was Jesus a participant in culture, but also a stranger to it. He challenged human tradition. As Jesus died and rose again, so to must cultures be challenged and reborn to express new values—values of human dignity and justice. Thus inculturation as we use it means both the awakening of Christianity through a cultural perspective as well as an awakening of culture to Christ's message.

Critical to our understanding of inculturation, therefore, is the use of the term 'culture'. For some African theologians such as John Mbiti, the Kenyan theologian and the late director of the World Council of Churches' Ecumenical Institute, and Charles Nyamiti, who played a key role in the beginnings of African Christian theology, culture refers to purely religious aspects such as African traditional religion or the African Independent Churches.¹⁷ For others such as Allan Aubrey Boesak, a South African liberation theologian, culture is viewed as less important than political concerns. However, to Boesak we must ask whether culture shapes politics and vice versa? Culture is inescapable, infiltrating all aspects of life. Oduyoye defines culture as:

"What human beings have made from nature, and because of nature and community. All that is not nature has been cultivated, worked upon, devised, dreamed up, and given shape and meaning by the human mind and hands. Culturing, therefore, is a continuous activity of the human community, and culture has become the locus of resistance."¹⁸

This leads to the question, why does it need its own theological field if it affects all theology? For Africans, the answer to this is that for so long was African culture degraded and devalued that to reclaim it is an act in itself of liberation from its colonial past. However, the approach to this must be careful.

Antonio points out two fundamental flaws in inculturation. First, as discussed, there is the neglect of theory behind its methods. Antonio points out that theolo-

17 Mbiti, John S. *Bible and Theology in African Christianity* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1986).

Nyamiti, Charles. "African Christologies Today." *Faces of Jesus in Africa*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998), 3-23.

18 Oduyoye, Mercy. *Introducing African Women Theology* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2001), 12.

gians focus so much on culture that they neglect the very nature of what they are doing. Secondly, Antonio argues that they lack a logical coherence or philosophy to support their ideas. Both of these points connect to the methodologies of inculturation theologians, and Antonio argues that their methodologies counter-act their goals. Because their methods try to “Christianize and Africanize” at the same time, they legitimize both.¹⁹ Inculturation appropriates Christian symbols onto cultural practices and cultural practices onto Christian beliefs. This begs the question: “If... there is no real or fundamental difference between Christianity and African traditional religion, if, that is, traditional religious practices are good enough to throw light on Christian practices why is Christianity needed at all, why is inculturation a desideratum of African theology?”²⁰

To respond to this, we must look to Shorter’s view of the incarnation and the Paschal mystery. As Antonio says, African theology must be about “cultural memory” as well as “political hope”.²¹ Cultural memory means the reclamation of identity through a reflection on the past, and political hope means an approach to the future that provides justice for all. Therefore the two-way process Shorter depicts can work to analyze both systems. This can be seen in the work of recent theologians such as Oduyoye. By finding a Christianity that works with and through culture, they find ways to empower people in the current situation.

References provided in the M.S.

19 Antonio. *Inculturation and Postcolonial Discourse in African Theology*, 53.

20 Ibid, 53.

21 Ibid, 55.